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ABSTRACT

Corporal punishment is one teacher-child interaction harmful to children. Corporal punishment inhibits learning, interferes with the accomplishment of each of the important developmental tasks of children and their teachers, and has the potential for physical harm to the child. Corporal punishment should be considered as child abuse and prohibited in all our schools. (Author)

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DISCIPLINE OR ABUSE?

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN THE SCHOOLS —

Children and their parents progress through social and emotional developmental stages in relaxation to each other. For school-aged children and their teachers, these stages become developmental tasks which they must accomplish to assure optimal cognitive development. Discipline is necessary for the accomplishment of these tasks. Discipline is also important for the safety and physical well-being of the child as well as for his or her social, emotional and cognitive development.

However, discipline and punishment are not synonymous. Some parents and teachers who are strict disciplinarians seldom resort to punishment. Some punitive parents and teachers are poor disciplinarians. The aim of discipline is to provide the child with outside control until he or she can develop the inner or self control necessary to function as a mature adult. Punishment is what adults resort to when discipline fails. The former head master of a well-known Eastern preparatory school commented to me recently, "When you resort to corporal punishment, you win the battle but you lose the war!" I am defining corporal punishment as the deliberate use of physical force such as impulsive shaking hitting, choking, swatting, head banging, caning or paddling. I am not talking about the bare-handed swat on the clothed buttocks of a preschool child although even this, uncontrolled, may have its dangers.

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There are five major developmental tasks of school-aged children and their teachers. Corporal punishment inhibits the accomplishment of each of these tasks.

By school age, the child should have developed what Erikson calls basic trust. The parallel developmental task of the teacher is to learn the cues; that is, to learn how to interpret the needs of each of his or her pupils. Corporal punishment erodes the youngster's basic trust, stimulates mistrust, anger, and resentment. The child learns that the adult world not only will not protect him from assault and battery, but also will sometimes be a party to it. Corporal punishment undermines the teacher's ability to interpret a pupil's basic needs and to provide an environment of mutual trust conducive to learning.

By school age the child should also have developed a feeling of autonomy or "I-ness." The teacher, therefore, has the task of accepting growth and development and learning to delegate some control to the students. Teachers must accept some loss of control while maintaining necessary limits. Again, corporal punishment slows the development of the child's feeling of autonomy and produces some degree of shame and doubt. The child's teacher fails in this developmental task, showing, at least in this one interaction, an inability to accept any loss of control.

By school age most children have achieved some degree of what Erikson calls initiative, that is to be able to move out in the world and appropriately assert himself or herself. Another developmental task of teachers is to separate themselves from their pupils and to

allow the children to develop independently while the teacher models optimal behavioral standards. Corporal punishment is demeaning, inhibits initiative and stimulates in many children the development of feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and the wish to retaliate. The teacher shows his or her inability to accept independent development and models the big and strong controlling the small and weak by force rather than a mutual respect relationship. Ralph Welsh, Adah Maurer and others are uncovering data which show a direct relationship between severe corporal punishment in early childhood and delinquency later in the life cycle. In these situations the child's initiative appears to be misdirected by the life style modeled by important adults.

The school-age child must learn to learn and to develop industry or the ability to learn, work and accomplish. His or her teacher has the task of accepting some degree of rejection and loss of control yet managing to be there when needed without intruding unnecessarily. Corporal punishment interferes with these processes by producing in the child some feeling of inferiority, helplessness and inability to accomplish while thrusting the teacher into the role of intruder rather than learning facilitator or teacher.

The school-age child explores roles and relationships and struggles to develop his or her own identity, that is who he or she is in relation to others. The teacher, therefore, must adjust to changing classroom roles, relationships and interactions. Once again, corporal punishment

interferes. The youngster may see himself or herself in relation to the authority figure administering the corporal punishment, in a number of ways depending on other life experiences. However, the child's own identity becomes diffused and the message is "might makes right." The teacher loses some flexibility in inter-relating with the individual student and with the class. The teacher also loses the ability to develop and to model a variety of alternative coping and controlling mechanisms made possible by an atmosphere of mutual respect.

What are some of these coping and controlling mechanisms - techniques for establishing discipline and avoiding punishment? Giving chores, suggesting substitute activities, providing face-saving outlets, setting up cooperative activities and being sensitive to a child's needs, values and feelings all come under this heading. An appropriate system of emotional and material rewards need not have the connotation of a bribe if based on the child's needs, values and feelings, and if aimed at establishing mutual trust and respect.

But even under the ideal conditions punishment is sometimes necessary and, if appropriate, and not cruel, demeaning or physically injurious, may have growth stimulating effects. Children have different temperaments and respond differently to expectations, no matter how clear and to limits, no matter how appropriate. A teacher may be able to communicate with and cope with one child and not with another, and may have to resort to

punishment more often with one child than with others. Isolation, deprivation of privileges, appropriate physical restraint and limitation of desirable activities may be effective especially if mutually agreed to and planned by teacher and pupil. Dr. Foster discusses alternatives in his excellent book "Ribbin', Jivin' and Playin' the Dozens". He also outlines four stages of teacher-student relationship - (1) Friends, (2) Rejection and chaos, (3) Discipline, (4) Humanization.

Teachers need support and consultation from their administrators and school consultative services - educational, health, and mental health if they are to accomplish the developmental tasks I have outlined and progress thru the stages outlined by Dr. Foster. A brief teacher-principal conference or teacher-mental health counselor conference takes little more time than a planned paddling session and the results are much more productive. Many teachers are able to keep order even under difficult circumstances without the use of corporal punishment and more teachers would achieve this goal given appropriate support.

Teachers must develop realistic expectations of themselves, an understanding of individual and cultural differences in children and an ability to cope with the unrealistic expectations of some administrators. To accomplish all this most teachers need educational and mental health consultation as well as back-up from their principals and other administrators. Without this consultation and back-up support, many teachers will find physical punishment the most expedient alternative and therefore will fail to accomplish their educational and developmental tasks.

Punishing a child may provide some relief of tension for some teachers and administrators, but there are more appropriate ways of providing relief. The very adult who uses this outlet may be the adult who was treated this way as a child and sees violence as the only alternative. It is very clear from the literature and in my experience that many battering and abusing parents were themselves abused as children.

In addition to interfering with the developmental tasks of both teacher and pupil, corporal punishment may be physically harmful to the child. There are a number of recorded incidents of severe tissue damage, CNS hemorrhage, lower spine injuries, sciatic nerve damage, and even blood

clots due to paddling. Recent evidence leads to the suspicion of possible whiplash injury especially in younger children. Other types of corporal punishment such as strapping also have the potential for physical harm.

Ms. Adah Maurer kindly has given permission to quote from her forthcoming book.

"In sworn testimony for the prosecution in a trial of a teacher accused of using excessive force and bizarre punishments, Dr. Moses Grossman of San Francisco gave a deposition:

'From the medical point of view, corporal punishment, unless very strictly controlled, always involves the risk of bodily damage which at times might be severe. This is particularly the case when punishment is being administered in the heat of anger - when the person administering the punishment may not be fully in control of his emotions and might apply more force than he intended.'

'In my opinion any kind of blow on the head must be absolutely banned. Any blow to the head whether delivered by a fist, open hand, book or results from being shoved into a wall can result in the production of either an epidural or subdural hemorrhage.'

'Similarly, choking should have no place in the methods of punishment used. Choking can result in a decrease of supply of oxygen to the brain, or might even result

in vomiting and aspiration of vomited contents into the lungs.'

'Blows about the chest, over the genitalia and kidney areas might also produce unexpected and serious physical difficulties.'

'Punishment which is capable of producing such injury should simply not be allowed. Although blows upon the buttocks have been known to cause broken blood vessels, massive fat emboli, and sciatic nerve damage, it is generally thought to be the safest area because no vital organs are located there. This of course presupposes that the skin is not broken and that the genitalia are protected.'

"Dr. Frederick L. Goodwin, an orthopedic surgeon of Portland, Oregon was asked to review and give an opinion on a school paddle that measured 33" including a 17" handle. The base was 10 3/4" across and 15/16" thick weighing 4 lbs. It had 26 holes each the size of a penny drilled through the base. He refers to it as a 'so-called paddle,' more in the category of a club or a semi-brutal weapon. His statement in part:

'From an orthopedic standpoint this would be considered a very dangerous weapon.... There are multiple reasons for this. The length of the paddle would give it such leverage

that the impact on the buttocks of a child could be such that it could give him several of the following: (1) It could cause a subdural hematoma from the contracoup effect. (2) It could cause particular hemorrhages in the brain from the same type of traumatic jar, as well as subarachnoid hemorrhages. (3) Also in reference to the gluteal muscles of the buttocks, it could do considerable damage to these and to the underlying bones of the pelvis. (4) If the paddle did not hit quite sharply, and was turned slightly obliquely, this paddle could cause severe damage to the sciatic nerves in the gluteal area... If it happened to hit in the right place, it could cause a fracture of the bones of the pelvis and/or the femoral femur. If the above is not enough, (5) it could knock even a grown adult of my size, something like 200 lbs., off his feet and the damage could be multiple if the child was knocked off his feet to the floor or into a wall.'

'The above considerations and opinions are given at this time on the basis of (1) as a human being with consideration for other human beings, (2) also as a father in consideration of children and (3) as a professional orthopedist in consideration of true medical injuries which could result from the use of such an instrument.'

Just as the reported incidence of child abuse varies with public and professional awareness, so I believe increased public and professional awareness of injuries due to corporal punishment will demonstrate an increased number of reports of injuries due to school paddling and other forms of corporal punishment.

Child abuse has been defined as any interaction or lack of interaction between a caregiver and a child resulting in non-accidental harm to the child's physical or developmental state. Paddling and other forms of corporal punishment may cause tissue damage and I believe that any punishment which causes such damage clearly falls in the category of child abuse.

Corporal punishment is one teacher-child interaction harmful to children. Corporal punishment inhibits learning, interferes with the accomplishment of each of the important developmental tasks of children and their teachers, and has the potential for physical harm to the child. Corporal punishment should be considered as child abuse and prohibited in all our schools.

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